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ABSTRACT

Writing exercises are games that can lead to success in the classroom because they are artificial and have arbitrary rules defined by the instructor. By giving students a starting point, a limited task, and the assurance that the writing is, after all, "just a game," exercises can circumvent students' initial anxieties about self-presentation and allow new material to arise inadvertently in the process of completing an assignment. Exercises that involve the recasting of previously written material--changing a personal piece into a dramatic monologue, altering verb tense, rearranging the order of stanzas or sentences--are particularly useful in developing concentration as one specific part of the writing process. Through memorization, students can begin to discover the complex links of sound, imagery, and rhetoric that hold a poem togther. Through the rules of the game of imitation, the students can examine and make use of techniques they would not have been able to use on their own. Furthermore, students completing an exercise can take certain imaginative risks within the boundaries of the task that they would never have considered in their own work. Repetition is another technique for stimulating students' imaginations by pushing "too far." Used correctly, writing exercises not only can help students get started, write imaginatively, and learn the techniques and problems of the craft of writing, but they also can lead to fundamental changes in students' work and their way of approaching writing. (HOD)

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Playing Games in the Writing Class: How Exercises Work

If writing is, as William Stafford put it, "one of the great, free human activities,"[1] why limit students' freedom by assigning them exercises? And if exercises are *per se* not the genuine article but rather a kind of warm-up or practice, as in the athletic sense of the term, why squander both students' time and our own dealing with them? Shouldn't the focus of a writing class be on writing itself? Though it is possible to argue that freedom can only be defined in terms of limits and that practice can occasionally make perfect, there is no denying that writing exercises set up artificial boundaries for our students and that completed exercises are not the same as good stories or poems. Exercises are games. They have arbitrary rules defined by the instructor, and they are distinguished from the "real" world of writing by virtue of these assigned limits. Yet we use these games in our classes and they help students learn to write. I don't think this is because our exercises transcend their inherent limitations. Rather it is the very artificiality of exercises, their arbitrary limits and "unreality," that lead to their success in the classroom.

The broadest and most important effect exercises have in the writing class is the way they direct students' attention to the process of writing, as distinguished from its product. Workshops without exercises are based on an often unrecognized assumption that students already know how to go about writing and should thus concentrate entirely on improving the drafts they produce. This assumption is false, as a quick look at beginning writers' own descriptions of how they work reveals. I ask my students to write such a description on the first day of class, and the results, even in advanced groups, show real gaps and limitations: students unable to re-draft, revising entirely by means of correction of individual words or phrases; students trapped into writing only at certain times of day or in certain moods, generally late at night when they're depressed; students unable to return to old material or work on more than one piece at a sitting; students unaware of basic ways to develop or transform their initial ideas. The "freedom" a student writing without exercises has is generally illusory. By leading students to examine and change the way they go about writing--either directly, through assignments which require them to approach writing in a different way; or indirectly, through the requirement of a particular end result that demands new writing methods for its attainment--clearly focussed exercises can expose students to a range of possibilities that would otherwise remain hidden. The learning these games develop is fundamental, involving real growth and change, not just the technical improvement of a product.

On a more specific level, exercises are valuable in the writing class because they help students discover what they really have to say. The fact that as great a poet as Sir Philip Sidney had to remind himself to "look in thy heart and write" shows how difficult the task of getting started is. Not that it is hard for every student to put words on the page or that beginning writers are reluctant to approach personal subjects; in this age of "self-expression" most writing students are only too eager to pour out their souls in verse or prose. But as Sidney's poem points out, it is easy to talk about oneself without saying anything. In attempting directly to "look into their hearts," students often get wrapped up in what they intend to do, how they want themselves to be presented in the finished text and judged by the reader, and the result is either paralysis or posing. Baroque introspection, bombastic assertion of private "truths," and other forms of self-conscious posturing take the place of genuine self-discovery. By giving students a starting point, a limited task, and the assurance that the writing is, after all, "just a game," exercises can circumvent students' initial anxieties about self-presentation and allow new material, more accurate and often more interesting aesthetically, to arise inadvertently in the process of completing the assigment.

I was struck by this result in an exercise I gave last winter to a group of advanced undergraduate poets. I asked them to write a paragraph in class describing an event they

remembered vividly and speculating about why it was important. The topics were the ones you might expect, encounters with sex and death for the most part, with the usual clichéed statements of meaning: "I learned the value of life"; "I finally became a man"; "I discovered what it means to be hurt." After we had briefly discussed the paragraphs, I asked the students to take them home and capture the experience again, this time in half-rhymed trimeter couplets. A whole series of new revelations ensued: One student discovered that the setting of an emotional confrontation she had considered pivotal in her life was in reality somewhat ludicrous; another found that her idyllic memory of two sisters playing the piano for their parents concealed a good deal of sibling rivalry; a third realized that the predominant feeling in his first sexual experience was not desire but confusion. Most of the exercises had the spark of a good poem in them, and the clichéed summaries of meaning were gone. The arbitrary limits of the exercise--in this case formal demands and the transformation of a subject already defined--had reduced the students' self-consciousness by changing the focus from direct self-analysis, which encourages self-doubt and the various defenses that arise from it, to the completion of a task. I can't say that anxiety was <u>reduced</u> here; that form is hard, and I got plenty of complaints. Rather the students' anxiety was transmuted from worries about how they were going to appear in the finished product to concerns of craft as they immersed themselves in the process of meeting the assignment.

An awareness of craft, the way a story or poem works, is perhaps the most obvious pedagogic benefit of exercises. Again the artificiality of writing assignments is at the heart of their effectiveness. Arbitrary limits can lead the student to focus in on one particular aspect of writing--the use of the line, say, or vividness of language--without having to worry about the rest of the piece. Exercises which involve recasting of previously written material--changing a personal piece into a dramatic monologue, altering the tense, rearranging the order of sentences or stanzas--are particularly useful in developing concentration on one specific part of the writing process. Though somewhat less focussed than the assignments I have mentioned, the time-honored tools of memorization and imitation can be helpful in leading students to engage some of the more subtle aspects of a piece of writing. Memorizing is perhaps the most mechanical kind of exercise a writing teacher can assign, but I have found from both my own memorization of poems and my students' that it is precisely the mechanical nature of the task that makes it valuable. In going over the poem again and again, trying to get it by heart before they collapse from the sheer repetition of the task, students begin to discover the often complex links of sound, imagery, and rhetoric that hold the poem together, not because they are purposely looking for these connections but because these are the things that make memorization easier. The struggle to meet the demanding rules of the memorization game inadvertently

develops awareness of aspects of craft which are difficult to approach directly. Though the rules of the game of imitation are more complex than those for memorization and the areas of discovery more varied--including tone, structure and movement, imagery, and general treatment of subject--the success of this kind of exercise is also based on its very "unreality." Knowing that the work he is producing is not supposed to be an original piece or a reflection of himself, the student writing an imitation can examine and make use of techniques he would not have been able to employ on his own.

Along with developing a new awareness of specific elements of the craft of writing, a student completing an exercise can take certain imaginative risks within the boundaries of the task that he would never consider in his own work. By designing exercises that are narrowly focussed but go a little beyond the expected bounds, we can lead beginning writers to take these chances. In The Triggering Town Richard Hugo describes an assignment derived from Roethke which asks the student to write a poem with strict limits on stanzaic form, meter, rhyme, syntax, and even vocabulary; Hugo's own addition to this stringent list of demands is that the poem be meaningless. Though the requirement of meaninglessness is, as Hugo notes, impossible to meet, he finds that students often do their most imaginative work of the term in response to this most narrowly defined of assignments.[2] Repetition is another technique for stimulating students' imaginations by pushing them "too far." I often ask

beginning students to write a series of five four-line studies of a simple object which I've assigned them--a utensil, an article of clothing, a kind of food--stipulating that each study must differ significantly in focus and voice from the others.[3] The first two or three studies are generally pretty easy; but since the objects are common and usually dull and each study must be different from the others, the final work the students do really stretches the imagination. I've seen a spoon described as the lost wing of a bird, mysterious proverbs derived from hiking boots, and a barrel cactus mumbling to itself as it contemplates growth. The stricter the rules of the game and the longer students are required to play it, the more likely it is that truly creative work will arise.

Exercises are, of course, exercises, and it would be wrong to expect anything more than brief moments of exciting work to arise from individual assignments. Indeed, if we were to demand more than this and enforce our demand by grading exercises, we would destroy the element of game that allowed the intriguing passages to develop in the first place. The limitations of exercises are obvious and, as I've noted, essential to their effectiveness as a teaching tool. Despite these limitations, however, exercises can not only help students get started, write imaginatively, and learn the techniques and problems of the craft; they can also lead to fundamental changes in students' work and, more importantly, their way of approaching writing. After a term of working with exercises, my students usually have individual

favorites among the assignments, and these can influence the general direction of their future work. One student, for example, became intrigued with the trimeter couplet exercise I mentioned and gradually changed his own predominant style from a somewhat conventional type of free verse to interestingly quirky rhymed stanzas which he feels allow him to say more; others have developed their own ideas and techniques through engagement with other writers' practices on the imitative assignments. Thom Gunn tells the perhaps somewhat apocryphal story of assigning a sestina as a class exercise and finding his student Diane Wakoski so enamored of the form that she wrote a hundred of them.[4] Though few of us would welcome a response quite this extreme, Wakoski's subsequent career shows the long-term value a student's exposure to a given exercise can have. It's not that she continued to write sestinas (this form, I must say, sounds like an exercise even when it isn't), but that certain aspects in the sestina assignment--the obsessive repetition, the length of the poem, its often circular progression--intrigued her and eventually surfaced in her mature work. We can't be certain what lasting effects different exercises may have, but they do provide a framework within which students are free to assimilate new ideas and techniques for their later work.

I have been stressing the fact that exercises are games and that they work because they are limited and artificial. The institutions that employ us, of course, pay us as writers and teachers to represent the "real" world of contemporary writing.

But what is that "real" world like? Perfected stories and poems do not, unfortunately, spring full-blown from our heads. We have as much trouble as anyone in cutting through the layers of self-consciousness and confusion to express our true feelings and ideas; some of us, like Auden, aren't sure what we think until we see it on the page. To fill the page, to find out what we have to say, we make up games. We set arbitrary limits of form, structure, speaker, and style, and we use our struggle with these boundaries to find out what is true. The games we play are different from those we assign students. The rules are often more complex and variable, the limits more in tune with what we have learned over the years about ourselves, our writing, and our goals. And, of course, our games are generally self-imposed; we know when to break the rules. But I suspect that one reason why exercises, artificial as they are, work well in the classroom is that they reflect what writers actually do.

Notes

[1] William Stafford, "A Way of Writing" in A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, Stuart Friebert and David Young, eds. (New York: Longman, 1980), p. 4.

[2] Richard Hugo, The Triggering Town (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 30-31.

[3] There are several models for this assignment in the work of Charles Simic, Vasko Popa, and Zbigniew Herbert, among others. My choice of form here is derived from David Young's "Occupational Hazards," included with helpful commentary in 50 Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process, Alberta T. Turner, ed. (New York: Longman, 1977), pp. 350-355.

[4] Thom Gunn, personal conversation, May, 1979.